

BEACON OF HISTORY

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

There is more to a lighthouse than an intermittent beam of light or a towering structure gracing a coastal cliff. It represents a time in American navigational history and tells a story of our past and people.

Take Gurnet Light for instance. Officially known as Plymouth Light, it is today listed on the National Register of Historic Sites, and maintains several "firsts" in American lighthouse history.

The very land this magnificent wooden tower stands on is rich in legend, for the Gurnet, so named after a copious fish native to an area of England, may well be the gravesite of Thorwald, son of Eric the Red. In 1004, after sustaining wounds from an encounter with Native Americans while his ship was stationed on the coast of Cape Cod, Thorwald set sail again and landed at a densely wooded and hilly area of Gurnet (although some believe the Norsemen landed at Point Allerton in Hull.) His dying wish was "to affix my abode here" in this ideal land.

The start of a lighthouse here began in 1769 on the land of John and Hannah Thomas. Its post and beam construction measured 30 feet long, 20 feet high and 15 feet wide, with two lantern rooms at each end. At a cost of 660 British pounds, it was North America's first "twin lights" and the Colony paid Thomas, the first keeper, a rental fee of 5 shillings per year.

Thomas served as a general under Washington in the Revolutionary War. By then Duxbury, Kingston and Plymouth had built Fort Andrew out on Gurnet Point. During the war, a cannonball fired at Fort Andrew by the British frigate *Niger* went astray and pierced the lighthouse. "It's possibly the only American lighthouse ever hit by foreign fire," said Alden Ringquist, Vice President of Gurnet Light for the non-profit group Project Gurnet & Bug Lights, Inc.

When John Thomas died in the war, his wife Hannah resumed her husband's duties— becoming America's first female lighthouse keeper— a position she held until 1790. That same year the United States government assumed ownership of the lighthouse.

Tragedy hit on July 2, 1801 when an oil fire destroyed the lighthouse. Two new twin towers, 30 feet apart with fixed white lights 70 feet above sea level, replaced the first lighthouse, but its sixth order lights were considered "entirely too small." The lights blended together at a distance and confused navigators with Barnstable's Sandy Neck Light.

The issue was resolved in 1871 with the installation of fourth order Fresnel lenses that increased the power of the lights. By then, octagonal wooden towers joined by an enclosed walkway had replaced the decrepit 1803 twin towers.

For the next 53 years, the octagonal twin towered lights assisted in navigation off the coast of Gurnet until the northeast light was torn down leaving only a single lighthouse. During the 1980s, it was leased from the Coast Guard by the Massachusetts Chapter of the U.S. Lighthouse Society and volunteer keepers resided in a nearby house.

In 1986, a modern optic replaced the Fresnel lens. This automation to the lighthouse ended the need for a Coast Guard officer as lighthouse keeper. "In 1994, the lighthouse was converted to solar power," said Ringquist, "and then in 1998, because of erosion, it was moved back approximately 140 feet from the cliff."

A year later, Project Gurnet and Bug Lights, Inc. took over the lease, and they continue today to maintain the 39 foot tall Gurnet Light —the country's oldest wooden lighthouse tower to beacon over our coastal waters.